

Cane River Settlement Pattern and Resources - 1806

Local folk terminology usually divided the valley into a series of "fronts" and "backs." The front land is the natural levee near the active or abandoned streams. It is primarily well drained silt-loam, grading into the "back," a series of poorly drained organic clays. Even today, land use is structured to make maximum use of these eco-niches.

The Freeman-Custis Expedition in 1806 left a concise early description of the area, one which still- a hundred ninety years later - seems to describe the region well (Flores 1984: 115-119). It bears repetition here:

From the confluence of little river with cane river, to Natchitoches, the land on both banks is generally cultivated, particularly the left bank, which presents a series of small plantations, each having one field in front, and extending back 80 to 100 perches to the Cypress Swamps. The inhabitants are a mixture of French, Spanish, Indian and Negro blood, the latter often predominating, and live in small cottages on the banks and near the river.

The comments on ethnicity were omitted from one published version of the journal (Flores 1984: 118). It belies the prejudices of the Anglo-Americans but otherwise does clearly note the rich ethnic heritage of the area. Moreover, it succinctly describes the *arpent* land division which covered front to back lands, levee to swamp land.

Culturally, it suggests some other early Anglo-American myopia. Small cottages already coexisted with West Indian-style

raised cottages built of substantial materials: brick and cypress. Also, there may have been one church, St. Augustine Catholic Church (Callahan et al. 1956), which may date to 1803. All were along the river bank and in plain view of travelers on the Cane River! There exist drawings of such raised, large houses along Cane River as early as the 1780s and the 1790s (Maes Maps: 1794: Cammie G. Herny Research Center, Northwestern State University).

These early settlements did contain small "cottages" built, like the Badin-Roque House, of *poteaux en terre*, posts in the ground, half-timbered construction in-filled with bousillage, a mixture of mud and Spanish moss, but these comprised part of a line of very substantial plantations where Creoles were commercially growing tobacco and indigo. The indigoteries, or processing plants, also were strung along the river - in plain view.

Still Freeman and Custis were correct, the land division offered everyone access to the *cyprieres*, the cypress swamps. Such backswamps were super important because the Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), which grew to prodigious sizes, provided a source of timber, not only for buildings but for commerce as well. Moreover, these wetlands were a place to hunt, graze cattle, gather moss, and find other resources.

Over the years, the Creoles on Isle Brevelle and along the river adjusted to plantation life styles. Farming was, from at least the 1780s, important. Cash crops evolved: First, there was tobacco, joined by indigo and, eventually, both these crops yielded to cotton. All these crops were labor intensive, and

most labor was human.

Over the years, even by the early nineteenth century, some 18,000 acres of land had been acquired and much of the natural levee area cleared and cultivated. Roads followed the natural levees, and lanes connected settlements and landings on the river. By the 1780s, the Creole settlers had clearly established plantations, landings for boats, and the beginnings of roads. By 1806, the settlement that Freeman and Custis described had been in place on the land a quarter century. Cane River was hardly a frontier. By the 1830s, when cotton was in widespread production in the area, the Creole plantations were well established. Like the Indians before them, the Creoles made major landings at the cutbank side of the river where, although bluffs developed, boats found it easier to leave the stream and to be propelled by the current towards the bank. Homes were built some distance back from active, caving banks of the river overlooking the landing, more prosperous ones with *alles* of Live Oaks (*Quercus virginiana*).

Yards were often fenced with picket fences; some were eventually replaced by wire fences. Fence palings, or *pieux*, were split from Cypress, cut in the back swamps, and neatly surrounded yards and gardens. Front yards were often planted with flowers: Lilies (St. Joseph's Lily and Easter Lily, various "Rain" Lilies), Sweet Olive (*Douce olive*), and Cape Jasmine were popular. Three Sisters roses were common. Sunflower and Princess Feather, both rich producers of oil seeds which were feed for chickens, guinea fowl, geese, and ducks, were frequently planted. Herbs, especially mints, were grown as well and

frequently mixed with flower beds.

Many houses had *pigeonniers*, pigeon houses, and these seem to have sat in side- or front yard areas. Some were built of wood, others of wire. Squab was a favorite delicacy. These were inside the yard space shared with chickens, geese, and ducks. Guinea, a favorite bird for gumbos, also, like geese, doubled as "watch" animals - making lots of noise when people or stray animals approached. Guineas also eat ticks, making them a handy yard animal to have around.

Gardens usually were planted near houses. They almost inevitably contained Okra, Onions, or Shallots, often some Garlic, Tomatoes, and Red (Cayenne) Peppers. Squash, Merlitions, Gourds and Pumpkins were other popular vegetables. Corn, Beans, and Peas were other garden plants. Crops were planted in rows; beans most often were staked with poles. Tomatoes, too, were often staked. These crops, near the houses, were all planted in the fertile alluvium and grew well. Exotic plantings occur, too, including among others Althea and Wisteria; llimosa, Chinaberry, Fig, and *Zis-Zis* trees; and fruits including Pomegranates, Peaches, and Plums. Yucca and Nopal Cactus were popular decorative plants, not to mention boundary markers. Trees, especially Pecan or Oak trees, were planted near homes. The Pecan tree at Landry Dupree's old house place was, for example, planted in 1918. It was the year of World War 1. Most of the Live Oaks are well over a century old.

All this exotic vegetation blended with the lush semi-tropical landscape. The original vegetation, especially cane (*Arundinaria* sp.) which gave the river its name, began to change

early. In 1806, Freeman and Custis noted the cane was more abundant on the river than it is today (Flores 1984: 114). Cane is extremely rare along the river today. It was easily cleared by burning and was replaced early by cultivated crops. Dense stands exist in the bottoms in the uplands, and these are scarce.

Only second- or third-growth Cypress, and even older hardwoods, exist only as "grow back" timber. Commercial logging took its toll - Montrose, Cypress, Flora and Derry all had sawmills that tapped the climax forests. Only a few stands of Bald Cypress exist along the backswamps today. The sawmills "cut out and got out"; the Montrose mill town flooded out, and today no active logging goes on along Cane River. Land clearing severely modified the backswamp forests in the 1970s. Soybeans were a primary crop, and wetlands, unsuitable for the cultivation of cotton and corn, were extensively cleared for soybean production. Only second-and third-growth timber, much of low economic value, covers that area today. Some families have re-converted their bean land into pasture; however, cattle production has declined recently because of dropping market prices. It seems possible that these forests will revive.¹

1. We Know Who We Are: . . . by H. F. Gregory and J. Moran
pp. 71-74